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SUBJECT: CAN A NEW MAYOR WITH FEW ALLIES AT LEAST FIX THE ROADS?

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¶1. Igor Pushkaryov took over as Vladivostok mayor on May 20. The new mayor seems to have few allies -- he avoids media attention and the public, has set up an administration of outsiders, and appears headed for a major conflict with Primorye Kray Governor Darkin. With campaign promises unfulfilled and a much-needed road repair project foundering, Pushkaryov's stay at city hall not been as successful as Vladivostok residents had hoped. Below is an outline of first five months of Vladivostok Mayor Igor Pushkaryov's tenure.

Staff: Mostly Out-of-Towners

¶2. Pushkaryov's first move upon taking office was to expand his team from eight to eleven deputies and to dismiss virtually all managers and specialists from the previous city administration. Most of the new personnel consists of friends and colleagues from Spassk-Dalniy, 230 kilometers west of Vladivostok, where he worked earlier as the director of a cement plant. Local political analysts have noted that because Pushkaryov's team has no connection to Vladivostok business and political elite, working with the Vladivostok City Duma and Primorye government may prove difficult.

Major Problem: Roads

¶3. Pushkaryov has already received public criticism for his handling of one of the most important issues for Vladivostok residents -- annual road renovations. Though the city tripled the budget for road improvements to one billion rubles for 2008, road work has barely begun. With only one third of the roads slated for repair currently undergoing work, there is no way for the annual project -- which must start in Spring to assure completion before the Winter freeze -- will be completed this fiscal year. Pushkaryov has countered criticism by asserting that delays were caused by bureaucratic hold ups, not administration mismanagement.

Campaign Promises: Still Working on Those...

¶4. One of Pushkaryov's most popular campaign promises was to construct 50 new kindergartens and to renovate existing facilities. After five months, however, renovation has begun on only one kindergarten, and no plans for new kindergarten construction have been announced.

¶5. Upon taking office, the new mayor announced that the previous administration left a city debt of just over 1 billion rubles (USD 40 million), presumably mostly made by lower-level administration members while former Mayor Vladimir Nikolayev was concentrating on defending himself against various criminal charges. Some of the debt consists of unpaid back wages for city employees. Pushkaryov says that his administration has already repaid one third of the debt.

Major Goal: Regional Status for the City

¶16. One way to help to improve the city's financial situation would be to keep more of the tax revenue it generates. Vladivostok provides about 70 percent of the taxes collected in the region, but keeps very little. Under the existing revenue-sharing arrangement, Vladivostok sends 51 percent of its revenues to the Kray and 38 percent to Moscow, leaving only 11 percent for the municipality.

¶17. Pushkaryov has stated his goal to change this situation by having the city, the largest and oldest in the region, officially designated as Kray capital. According to federal law, this designation would allow the city to reduce the amount it sends to Moscow by 10 percentage points. Former Mayor Vladimir Nikolayev had pushed for such a measure several times but failed. In 2005, the Primorye Duma passed a resolution allowing the designation, but Governor Darkin -- presumably worried that increased funds for Vladivostok would give the Kray less influence over the city -- quickly vetoed the bill. Darkin -- who, as governor of the Kray, has the authority to direct all tax revenue collected in the region -- continues to tighten financial control over the city. In 2000, he allowed the city to keep 39 percent of its own revenues, but by 2007 lowered the amount to 11 percent.

Public Personality: Not Much Face Time

¶18. Pushkaryov does not seek the limelight, and seems uncomfortable in front of the public and the media. He does not meet with journalists often -- he tends to rely on written press releases instead -- and rarely attends protocol events. He has a much lower public profile than his predecessor Vladimir Nikolayev, who often met with city residents to discuss local

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issues and frequently attended public and social events.

Comment

¶19. It is hard to imagine a successful tenure for a new mayor with virtually no allies. Pushkaryov spends little time with the public, is unfriendly to the media, and has brought a team of unknown outsiders to the city. Furthermore, he appears to be heading into a fight with Governor Darkin over city status that he likely to lose. The people of Vladivostok have low expectations for their mayors, but Pushkaryov has already left them underwhelmed. Renovating the city's crumbling roads would have gone a long way with city residents, but the new mayor's mishandling of this year's project has not only left doubts about his management skills, but also leaves many wondering why increased funding has led to fewer new roads. Furthermore, most of the construction for APEC will take place during his tenure, and any problems with that project will likely fall square on his shoulders.

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